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CHAUCEUR AND LUCAN'S *PHARSALIA*

It has long been recognized that Chaucer had an acquaintance with Lucan's *Pharsalia*, but no definite effort has been made to determine to what extent he made use of it in his own writings. Professor Lowes referred to the relationship between the two poets in an article in the *Nation*¹ and indicated some investigations that he expects to prosecute with regard to Chaucer's knowledge of Lucan through translations when the cessation of hostilities will permit his examination of some MSS in Europe. As Professor Lowes says, Chaucer undoubtedly knew the Latin original. Though perhaps Chaucer was not a scholar in the modern sense, or even in the mediaeval—and for this let us be thankful—there is abundant evidence that his knowledge of the Latin classics was extensive. These investigations of Mr. Lowes with regard to Chaucer's relation not only to Lucan but also to Ovid and the other classical writers will certainly prove of great significance in estimating the diverse elements that entered into Chaucer's literary equipment. Meanwhile it may not be unprofitable to carry forward a critical comparison between Chaucer and his Latin originals which was undertaken some years ago, and some results of which have been printed in previous notes and articles.

In all of Chaucer's work there are four references to Lucan² by name: one in the *Troilus and Criseyde*, one in the *House of Fame*, one in the *Tale of the Man of Lawe*, and the fourth in the *Monk's Tale*.

¹ *Nation*, Supplement (December 21, 1916), p. 2.

² See Skeat, *Oxford Chaucer*, III, 279.

In the *Troilus and Criseyde* there is only the line giving the names of the great poets,

Virgile, Ovyde, Omer, Lucan, and Stace.

[*Troilus*, V, 1792.]

Here Lucan's name is joined with one, Homer, whose work Chaucer evidently did not know at first hand, and with three whom he did know, Virgil, Ovid, and Statius. This line, therefore, cannot justify any inference about Chaucer's acquaintance with Lucan.

In the *House of Fame* there is apparently a little more to go upon:

Tho saugh I, on a piler hy,
Of yren wrought ful sternely,
The grete poete, daun Lucan,
And on his shoulders bar up than,
As highe as that I mighte see,
The fame of Julius and Pompee.

[*H.F.*, 1497-1502.]

It is evident from this passage that Chaucer knew that Lucan in the *Pharsalia* had much to say about Caesar and Pompey. Whether Chaucer knew this from his own reading of the Latin poet or got his information from someone else, this passage does not indicate.

In the *Tale of the Man of Lawe* Chaucer refers to Lucan as describing a great triumph of Julius Caesar:

Noght trowe I the triumphe of Julius
Of which that Lucan maketh swich a bost.

[*B* 1, 400-401.]

Apparently the same idea is in Chaucer's mind when he says in the *Monk's Tale*:

To Rome agayn repaireth Julius
With his triumphe, laureat ful hye.

[*B* 1, 3909-10.]

Upon this point of Chaucer's attributing an account of a triumph of Julius Caesar to Lucan, Professor Skeat says: "See Lucan's *Pharsalia*, iii. 79: 'Perdidit o qualem vincendo plura triumphum.' But Chaucer's reference, evidently made at random, is unlucky. Lucan laments that he had no triumph to record."¹ Professor Lounsbury explains Chaucer's mistake about the triumph as due to careless

¹ See Skeat, *Oxford Chaucer*, V, 153.

reading of Lucan.¹ The fact is, of course, that Lucan does not give any account of a triumph of Caesar because of his victory over Pompey, for Caesar never celebrated such a triumph. One can see, however, by reading the following passage in Lucan how Professor Lounsbury's suggestion might be correct:

Pro, si remeasset in urbem,
Gallorum tantum populis arctoque subacta,
Quam seriem rerum longa praemittere pompa,
Quas potuit belli facies! ut vincula Rheno
Oceanoque daret, celsos ut Gallia currus
Nobilis et flavis sequeretur mixta Britannis!
Perdidit o qualem vincendo plura triumphum!

[*Pharsalia* iii. 73-79.]

But two other passages in the *Pharsalia*, to which attention has not been called, might much more directly have suggested to Chaucer that Caesar expected to enjoy a triumph after his defeat of Pompey. The inference, therefore, that he did enjoy the triumph would be all the more natural. The first passage is:

Campis prostrata iacere
Agmina nostra putes; nec enim felicibus armis
Misceri damnata decet, partemque triumphi
Captos ferre tui; turba haec sua fata peregit,
Hoc petimus, victos ne tecum vincere cogas.

[*Pharsalia* iv. 358-62.]

Here the soldiers who have deserted Pompey's side and fled to Caesar are begging not to be made a part of Caesar's triumphal procession, assuming apparently that a triumph will certainly be enjoyed by him.

The second passage is a boast of Caesar himself in an address to his mutinous soldiers:

Anne fugam Magni tanta cum classe secuntur
Hesperiae gentes, nobis victoria turbam
Non dabit, impulsi tantum quae praemia belli
Auferat et vestri rapta mercede laboris
Lauriferos nullo comitetur volnere currus?
Vos despecta, senes, exhaustaque sanguine turba
Cernetis nostros iam plebs Romana triumphos.

[*Pharsalia* v. 328-34.]

¹ Lounsbury, *Studies in Chaucer*, II, 254.

The first three stanzas "de Julio Caesare" in the *Monk's Tale* are a rapid summing up of the main facts in Lucan's *Pharsalia*. The lines

Up roos he, Julius the conquerour,
That wan al th' occident by lond and see,

appear to be Chaucer's condensation of Lucan's rather long roll call of the various Gallic and Germanic tribes that were subject to Caesar.¹

Lucan begins by saying,

Caesar, ut acceptum tam prono milite bellum
Fataque ferre videt, ne quo languore moretur
Fortunam, sparsos per Gallica rura cohortes
Evocat et Romam motis petit undique signis.

After enumerating the tribes Lucan tells of Caesar's advance into Italy and the terror that his coming created; and he is to be greatly feared because,

Hunc inter Rhenum populos Alpemque jacentes
Finibus arctois patriaque a sede revolsos,
Pone sequi jussamque feris a gentibus urbem
Romano spectanti rapi.

In the following lines about Pompey,

That of th' orient hadde al the chivalrye
As fer as that the day beginneth dawe,

Chaucer apparently is thinking of Lucan's exaltation of Pompey. In the *Pharsalia* Lucan represents Pompey, his hero, as the leader of all the nations of the East which have flocked to his standard because he is so great and famous as a general. In trying to arouse his soldiers to battle Pompey boasts of the nations that he has conquered.² A little later Lucan says that Pompey, when all hope in Italy is gone, looks toward the East and sends his oldest son to arouse the nations of the Orient.³

Though Pompey is his hero, Lucan of necessity gives Julius Caesar much prominence in his story. Pompey and Caesar are the two opposing forces struggling for control of the known world. Chaucer dramatically presents one as the conqueror of the Occident and the other as the leader of all the forces of the Orient.

In the line

O mighty Cesar, that in Thessalye,

Chaucer indicates his knowledge of the country where the contest between Caesar and Pompey took place. The fact that Lucan

¹ See *Pharsalia* i. 393-465.

² *Ibid.* ii. 583 ff.

³ *Ibid.* 628-44; see also vii. 360-64.

makes so much of Thessaly,¹ giving an account of its inhabitants, boundaries, mountains, and rivers, served no doubt to impress the name upon Chaucer's mind.

That the *Pharsalia* was in Chaucer's mind when he was writing this story of Julius Caesar seems clear from the fact that Chaucer stops his account of Caesar to bewail the fate of Pompey, of whom Lucan makes so much. In fact it is Pompey's fate with which the *Pharsalia* concerns itself.

But now a litel whyl I wol biwaille
 This Pompeius, this noble governour
 Of Rome, which that fleigh at this bataille;
 I seye, oon of his men, a fals traitour
 His heed of smoot, to winnen him favour
 Of Julius, and him the heed he broghte.
 Allas Pompey, of th' orient conquerour
 That fortune unto swich a fyn thee broghte!

Of the three authors, Lucan, Suetonius, and Valerius, to whom Chaucer refers the reader in the closing stanza of this story of Julius Caesar, it is easy to see from which one he derived the very concrete statement that one of Pompey's own men cut off his head. Suetonius² merely says that Pompey was killed before Caesar's arrival. Valerius Maximus,³ though mentioning the fact that Pompey's head was cut off, attributes it to Egyptian treachery. But Lucan gives in full the details which Chaucer evidently had in mind.⁴

It would seem clear enough that Chaucer names his authorities correctly when he says:

Lucan, to thee this storie I recomende
 And to Sweton, and to Valerie also
 That of this storie wryten word and ende.

One of Chaucer's feats was condensing in brief form for his contemporaries the epic poems of some of the popular Latin poets. We find him giving a summary of the entire *Aeneid* in the first book of the *House of Fame*, and of the *Thebaid* toward the end of the *Troilus and Criseyde*. In the *Monk's Tale* he has summarized in three stanzas

¹ *Pharsalia* vi. 333-412.

² Suetonius *XII Caesares*, C. *Julius Caesar* 35.

³ Valerius Maximus *De factis et dictis Memorabilibus*, v. 1, Sec. 10.

⁴ *Pharsalia* viii. 592-673.

practically all the important points in Lucan's *Pharsalia*. The rest of the story of Julius Caesar, which Lucan, of course, does not tell—how Brutus Cassius, as Chaucer calls him, attacked Caesar, and how Caesar drew his mantle about him while dying—Chaucer obtained, as he says, from Suetonius¹ and Valerius Maximus.²

If Lucan was a popular poet in the Middle Ages³ and Chaucer was acquainted with his poem, the question naturally arises, Why did Chaucer make so little use of Lucan in his works? The answer is not far to seek. Lucan's subject-matter and style in the *Pharsalia* were not such as to make an appeal to our English story-teller poet. Lucan's long speeches, eloquent as they are, smack of the rhetorician's art and seem to be introduced to display the poet's power of declamation, as do also the long descriptions of peoples and places in which he indulges. Consider, for instance, Lucan's ethnological and geographical account of Thessaly. To Lucan, Pompey was the representative of freedom, which was hopelessly crushed by Julius Caesar's superior force. Chaucer, however, had no concern with the political or historical events of antiquity, for

They are gone: ay, ages long ago.

For instance, Chaucer cared nothing for Aeneas as the reputed founder of Rome and the ancestor of Augustus—matters of prime importance to Virgil—but he was intensely concerned with him as the lover and deserter of Dido. The constant appeal of Ovid's poetry to Chaucer consists in the varied manifestations presented by "Venus clerk" of the eternal human passions. Hence Chaucer's very much more extensive use of Ovid than of any other classical poet.

Though Chaucer doubtless enjoyed reading "the grete poete, daun Lucan," he found little to appropriate from his writings. Lucan's eloquent apostrophes to Pompey as the apostle of freedom made no appeal to a narrative poet like Chaucer, whose primary interest was in telling his story. The element of "human interest," for which Chaucer had so keen an appreciation, was not to be found in Lucan's *Pharsalia*.

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¹ Suetonius *XII Caesares*, J. Caesar 82.

² Valerius Maximus *De factis et dictis Memorabilibus* iv. 5.

³ Sandys, *History of Classical Scholarship*, I, 641.